The Cost of “Managing Fine without an interpreter” | Invisible Communication Gaps and the Misclassification of Performance

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Many Hard-of-Hearing employees “manage fine” while silently missing critical information. This NCG Insight examines how invisible communication gaps distort performance, create compliance risk, and why organizations must treat communication as infrastructure, not assumption.

There is a version of accessibility failure that does not look like failure at all. It presents as competence. It sounds like participation. It shows up as someone who is “keeping up,” attending meetings, responding when prompted, and moving work forward just enough to avoid immediate concern. On the surface, the system appears to be functioning. Underneath, information is being lost in small, consistent increments that compound over time.

The account of a Hard-of-Hearing professional working within an ASL (American Sign Language) interpreting environment exposes this dynamic with unusual clarity. For a full year, the individual operated under the assumption that no additional support was needed. Meetings were attended. Conferences were navigated. Work progressed. There was no obvious signal that anything was structurally wrong. The gap was not visible to the person experiencing it, which meant it could not be named, requested, or corrected.

The first indication of breakdown did not come from the individual. It came from management. A supervisor observed missed follow-through from team meetings, a pattern that suggested incomplete comprehension of what had been discussed. That observation

reframed the situation. What had been perceived internally as “managing fine” was externally registering as inconsistency in execution. The critical detail is that the employee had no awareness of the information that was being missed. Without that awareness, there is no mechanism for self-correction. The system fails silently.

This is where organizations routinely misclassify the problem. When communication gaps are invisible, the outcomes they produce are interpreted through a performance lens. Missed details become lack of attention. Delayed follow-up becomes lack of ownership. Partial understanding becomes perceived disengagement. The organization responds to the symptom rather than the source, reinforcing a narrative that places responsibility on the individual rather than the communication environment.

The introduction of a qualified interpreter, even temporarily, altered that environment in a way that makes the underlying issue measurable. During a three-day company retreat, the individual made a deliberate decision to rely fully on an interpreter rather than attempting to divide attention between audio input and captioning. The result was not incremental improvement. It was a step change. Fatigue decreased. Cognitive load stabilized. Comprehension moved from a fragmented, reconstructed understanding to near-complete clarity.

That shift is not anecdotal. It is diagnostic.

It demonstrates that the baseline condition was not “adequate with minor gaps.” It was a sustained state of partial information loss. The individual had been operating within a system that required constant compensation, reconstructing meaning from incomplete inputs, and doing so without a reliable way to verify accuracy. Once the communication channel was stabilized, the need for compensation disappeared, and performance conditions normalized.

This exposes a broader organizational risk that is often overlooked. Communication is treated as a given, an assumed layer of workplace function that does not require active validation. In reality, communication is infrastructure. When it is unstable, every downstream process is affected. Decisions are made on incomplete information. Work is executed with gaps in context. Feedback loops are distorted because they are based on outputs that do not reflect full understanding.

The presence of captioning in the retreat environment further illustrates the limitations of commonly accepted solutions. Captions were available, but accuracy was inconsistent, particularly in the presence of accents and multi-speaker dynamics. The system provided partial access, which created the illusion of sufficiency while still requiring the individual to fill in missing pieces. This is a recurring pattern in accessibility design. Tools that perform adequately in controlled conditions are deployed into complex environments where their limitations become more pronounced, yet their presence signals that the requirement has been met.

The psychological dimension of this experience adds another layer of complexity. The hesitation to request an interpreter was not based on lack of need. It was influenced by internalized thresholds of legitimacy. The individual did not perceive themselves as “Deaf enough” to justify the accommodation. There was a sense that resources should be reserved for those with more visible or severe needs. This dynamic is not uncommon. It creates a filtering mechanism where individuals suppress their own requirements in order to align with perceived norms or expectations.

From an organizational standpoint, this introduces a structural blind spot. If access is contingent on self-identification, and self-identification is constrained by uncertainty or stigma, then a portion of need will remain undisclosed. The system will appear to function while quietly excluding those who do not meet an internalized threshold for requesting support. This is not a failure of individual advocacy. It is a design flaw in how accessibility is

triggered and delivered.

The implication for management is significant. Performance evaluations, team dynamics, and development pathways are all influenced by the quality of communication. When that quality is inconsistent, the data used to assess performance is inherently unreliable. Managers may attribute gaps to capability or effort without recognizing that the underlying issue is information integrity. Once that misattribution occurs, corrective actions target the wrong variable, and the original problem persists.

Addressing this requires a shift from reactive to proactive models of accessibility. Rather than waiting for explicit requests, organizations must create conditions where communication effectiveness is continuously evaluated. This includes assessing not just whether individuals are present in conversations, but whether they are receiving and processing information at a level that supports full participation. It involves normalizing the use of interpreters across a spectrum of hearing profiles, reducing the perceived barrier to access by making it a standard component of communication rather than an exception.

It also requires a reassessment of the tools being relied upon to deliver access. Captioning, while valuable, cannot be treated as a universal solution, particularly in environments with high variability in speech patterns and interaction styles. Organizations must understand the limitations of these tools and ensure that alternative pathways are available when those limitations are reached.

At its core, this is an issue of alignment. The organization believes it is providing access. The individual believes they are managing within the system. The outcomes suggest otherwise. Bridging that gap requires more than policy. It requires a recalibration of how communication is understood and validated as a foundational element of work.

The experience described is not an isolated case. It reflects a broader pattern in which individuals operate within systems that are not fully accessible, compensating in ways that

mask the underlying deficiency. The cost of that compensation is borne over time, through increased fatigue, reduced clarity, and the gradual accumulation of missed information. When those costs surface, they are often interpreted as individual shortcomings rather than systemic issues.

The correction is not complex in concept, but it requires intentional execution. Organizations must treat communication as a measurable component of performance infrastructure. They must recognize that absence of complaint does not equate to adequacy. They must create environments where access is not negotiated or justified, but assumed and verified.

THE CORE DISTINCTION

When communication is stabilized, performance becomes a more accurate reflection of capability. When it is not, performance is a distorted signal shaped by the limitations of the system.

That distinction determines whether organizations are evaluating their people or their processes.

In many cases, it is the latter that requires attention.